

Mutton Dressed as Lamb? Fashioning Age in Georgian England

Amanda Vickery

Abstract Despite an established literature on gender, consumerism, and dress, there is almost no research on fashion and the life cycle. Meanwhile, the historiography on aging has addressed stigma, physicality, and sexuality, though only tangentially the manufacture of femininity through clothes. This article links the two separate historiographies. It is concerned with the ongoing fabrication of mature femininity through fashionable clothes, and the paradoxes inherent in that performance. The misogynist attack on dressy older women was pungent, but mature women still had to clothe themselves. Accusations of frolicking in a lamb fashion were mortifying, but keeping up appearances was vital too. This article examines the interplay of age and fashion, re-creating the distinctive way women of the middling ranks and lesser gentry negotiated the pitfalls of dressing past their prime, charting a perilous course between indignity and scorn on the one hand and invisibility on the other. Perceptions of age and aging bore unevenly on women and men. Nevertheless, conviction about the decorum of female sartorial retirement once the blush was off the peach and savage portrayals of hideous physical decline were counterbalanced by the blandishments of the market itself. Cumulatively, the Georgian marketplace tended to endorse the public profiles of older women, suggesting a galaxy of imagined performances that overwhelmed the misogynist discourse arguing for their obliteration.

Mutton dressed as lamb is a vintage dish. As any cook will know, mutton is the butcher's term for the meat of an older sheep—from a ewe or occasionally a castrated ram. Mutton could denote women in general, though it was hardly a flattering designation. Food could be “dressed” from the fifteenth century on, but by the early sixteenth century, “mutton” was slang for “food for lust, loose women, prostitutes” and spawned many variants to describe women seeking lovers or as lust objects themselves.¹ “Mutton dressed as lamb” may have originated in recipe books, but by the eighteenth

Amanda Vickery is professor of early modern history at Queen Mary, University of London. This essay was presented at the Early Modern Programme, University of Uppsala, the Brandeis Graduate History Seminar, and the V&A/RCA Design History seminar at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and she would like to thank the organizers and audiences of these forums. She would also like to thank Linda Baumgarten, Lynn Bothelo, James Ellison, Laura Gowing, Karen Harvey, Mia Jackson, Leslie Miller, Susan North, Kate Retford, Miri Rubin, Julie Wakefield, Marina Warner, and Evelyn Welch, as well as Daniel Beer, Clarissa Campbell Orr, Michele Cohen, Hannah Grieg, Colin Jones, John Styles, Naomi Tadmor, and anonymous readers for the *JBS* for critical reading and advice.

¹ “Laced Mutton” was slang for prostitute, and “Mutton Monger” a man addicted to wenching. See *A Classical Dictionary of The Vulgar Tongue* (London, 1785).

century, “mutton drest lamb fashion” had become a stock joke ridiculing the fashionable frills and futile artifice of older women. A poem titled “The Mantua Maker” from 1737 retails a shopworn joke—the purchase of girlish trimmings in the vain pursuit of lost allure.

When age decays
Fair beauty’s blaze
Unto the mantua maker
The prude with care,
She must repair,
Or no kind man will take her.
Thus we contrive
To keep alive,
The expiring flame of passion:
So all adore
(tho’ full fourscore)
Our mutton drest lamb-fashion.²

As advancing decrepitude destroyed sexual attractiveness, the foolish old woman tried to stem the loss of femininity with fashionable accoutrements.

Eighteenth-century conventions of life cycle, dress, and decorum were themselves built on distinctive assumptions about aging. The current legal threshold of old age in Britain is sixty-five, though it is widely accepted that chronological and physiological age are often at variance. Even a brief survey over the last four hundred years reveals that old age is a movable frontier depending on sex, wealth, diet, locale, and epoch.³ And if the threshold of old age is unstable, so too is its precursor, middle age. Modern dictionaries often define middle age as the years between forty or forty-five and sixty. There was little positive reference to female “middle age” in eighteenth-century health literature, sermons, satire, and fiction. In fact, there was little public recognition of their “middle age” at all. Rather, there was an alarming hemorrhage of youth from the late twenties with absolute “old age” in women appearing to arrive at least a decade earlier than today, around fifty.

The eighteenth century comprehended competing ideas of the body and its phases, but in general, youth was perceived to end much earlier in women than in men. Classical humoral theory inherited from Hippocrates and Galen saw aging as a series of temperamental shifts experienced by both sexes—the later shifts diminishing sexual difference. From a woman’s thirties, her femininity was an ebb tide. Conversely, several seventeenth-century medical authors saw the years between thirty-five and fifty, or even thirty-five and sixty, as the epoch of manhood.⁴ Similarly, mature

² “The Mantua Maker,” in *The London Magazine; or, Gentleman’s Monthly Intelligencer* (London, 1737), 574. In case the antiquity of mutton was in doubt, a woman past her prime might be labeled an “old Ewe.” “Look at the old Ewe dressed lamb-fashion’ gasped visitors at the theatre in the Belle Assemblée of 1807. ‘Where? Oh Horrid, horrid!’ I raised my head, and could not help exclaiming with them horrid!” *La Belle Assemblée*, 50 vols. (London, 1807), 2:222.

³ For an overview, see Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: “Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain”* (1995; London, 2004); Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, eds., *Women and Aging in British Society Since 1500* (Harlow, 2001); Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford, 2000).

⁴ Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), 54–55.

heads of households were at the peak of their virility in the eyes of eighteenth-century public opinion.⁵ Men then were in their prime in their forties, perhaps even fifties, the very decades when women were visibly growing old. Looking back at age sixty-one in 1705, Lady Sarah Cowper decided forty was the worst age for women “being neither yong enough to be beautifull, nor old enough to be venerable,” though “a man (in respect of good looks) is then att his best.”⁶ Fears that men experienced a midlife deterioration heralding the onset of senescence and death would not gain currency until the nineteenth century (although Victorian novels still celebrated men as attractively marriageable in their forties, the barrier for women was thirty), while the coinage “midlife crisis” awaited the 1960s.⁷ Georgian women not only aged earlier than men but also more distastefully it appears.

What is middle-aged by most definitions today was definitively old for the Georgians. Menopause triggered a sudden transition to old age, argues Lynn Botelho—the signs of which were read on the face and body: the “hoary head,” wrinkles, toothlessness, dowager’s hump, and stooping posture, perhaps supported by a stick. Though menarche was later than today, the available evidence suggests that on average menopause probably occurred about the same time, around age fifty or fifty-one, but its physical side effects were dramatically accentuated by poor diet, poverty, grinding toil, and a lack of mitigating treatments.⁸ The bent crone is the very model of the witch, though white hair and wrinkles might also enhance the moral authority of women (especially over younger women) in their own communities.⁹ Evil or wise, a woman was ancient by fifty-one.¹⁰

The summer of female beauty was all too brief. Judging by women’s manuals and the praise of journalists, novelists, poets, and nonliterary letter-writers, the basic ingredients of beauty were vigorous health, no disfiguring marks of disease, symmetrical features, good teeth, bouncy curls, a pink and white complexion, a pearly neck, a luscious décolletage, and a nubile form.¹¹ The average age of marriage was

⁵ Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT, 2009), 49–82.

⁶ Anne Kugler, “I Feel Myself Decay Apace: Old Age in the Diary of Lady Sarah Cowper (1644–1720),” in Botelho and Thane, *Women and Aging in British Society Since 1500*, 73.

⁷ Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Mid Life in Victorian Britain* (2009), 1–24. In its nature, what constitutes “middle age” is itself mutable, adjusting to the moving threshold of old age, though a single, meaningful measure of elderliness has proved elusive. Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford, 2009).

⁸ Lynn Botelho, “Old Age and Menopause in Rural Women of Early Modern Suffolk,” in *Women and Aging*, 43–65. Menopause was not a term used until the nineteenth century and there was debate among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century medical authorities about its implications for female health. See Sarah Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720* (Oxford, 1998), 25–26. For later debates, see Louise Foxcroft, *Hot Flushes, Cold Science: A History of the Modern Menopause* (London, 2010).

⁹ Laura Gowling, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth Century England* (New Haven, CT, 2003), 79.

¹⁰ Medieval convention also saw fifty as the boundary of old age. Sahar, “Who Were Old in the Middle Ages?” *Social History of Medicine* 6 (1993): 314–41.

¹¹ Robert Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge, 1998); Angela Rosenthal, “Visceral Culture: Blushing and the Legibility of Whiteness in Eighteenth-Century British Portraiture,” *Art History* 27, no. 4 (September 2004): 562–92; Ruth Yeazell, *Fictions of Modesty: Women and Courtship in the English Novel* (Chicago, 1991), 65–80.

comparatively late—the midtwenties.¹² Yet novelists suggest the bloom was off the rose by twenty-five or twenty-six. If you had to paint on your blushes with rouge, then beauty had already fled. Even intelligent, witty women complained of the fading of their charms in their thirties.¹³ Social authorities asserted that young adulthood was the only moment of legitimate exhibition. Beau Nash's "Rules for the Assemblies at Bath" in 1742 ensured that only ripe belles were in the spotlight, while the rest were consigned to back stage. "That the elder ladies and children be content with a second bench at the ball, as being past or not come to perfection."¹⁴ Once a woman was "past her prime," the conduct books expected her to renounce praise and resign herself to neglect and invisibility. Mature extroverts who still enjoyed a party, and God forbid admiration, were easily lampooned.¹⁵ Common convention decreed that women were only truly pleasant to gaze upon and therefore worthy of the spotlight when the dew was on the peach. An older woman who had the temerity to display herself to the public ran the risk of shudders, not applause. When David Garrick was urged to restage *The Jealous Wife* in 1767 for the fifty-seven-year-old comedienne Hannah Pritchard, he recoiled at her "great Bubbies, Noddling head, & no teeth—O Sick—Sick—Spew—."¹⁶

The historiography on aging is rich and growing, addressing questions of socio-economic opportunities and constraints, stigma and scorn, physicality and sexuality, though only tangentially the manufacture of femininity through clothes.¹⁷ There is an established literature on gender and consumerism and growing interest in eighteenth-century material culture and objects.¹⁸ However, despite a well-entrenched

¹² See the age of marriage table in E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (London, 1981), 255. These are broad means, within which there was variation by rank, occupation, and locality.

¹³ Anne Elliot's bloom had long vanished by age twenty-six, while her older sister Elizabeth though very handsome "felt her approach to the years of danger." Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1817; Oxford, 2004), 11–12. A letter to the editor of the *London Magazine* (March 1777), 132–33, proposed that no woman should be allowed to marry after the age of thirty-five "as at that period they shall be incapable of performing any of the necessary functions incident to such a happy state." Discussed in Cindy McCreery, *The Satirical Gaze: Prints of Women in Late Eighteenth Century England* (Oxford, 2004), 214.

¹⁴ Oliver Goldsmith, *Life of Richard Nash, Esq* (London, 1762), 33; James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (London, 1766), 112.

¹⁵ For literary criticisms of aging socialites, see Katharine Kittredge, "'The Ag'd Dame to Venerly inclin'd': Images of Sexual Older Women in Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-industrial Past*, ed. Susanna Ottaway, Lynn Botelho, and Katharine Kittredge (Ithaca, NY, 2002), 247–65.

¹⁶ David M. Little and George M. Kahrl, eds., *The Letters of David Garrick*, 3 vols. (London, 1963), 2: 557, 8 February 1767.

¹⁷ See especially Sahar, *Growing Old*; Botelho and Thane, *Women and Aging*; Ottaway et al., *Old Age in the Pre-industrial Past*; Thane, *Old Age in English History*; Susanna Ottaway, *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2004); Pat Thane, ed., *A History of Old Age* (London, 2005).

¹⁸ See Lorna Weatherill, "A Possession of One's Own: Women and Consumer Behaviour in England, 1660–1740," *Journal of British Studies* 25 (1986): 131–56; Amanda Vickery, "Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and her Possessions, 1751–81," in *Consumption and the World of Goods: Consumption and Society in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London, 1993), 274–301; Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, "Women, China and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, no. 2 (1995–96): 153–67; Marcia Pointon, *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession and Representation in English Visual Culture, 1665–1800* (Oxford, 1997); Johanna Dahn, "Women and Taste: A Case Study of Katharine Plymley (1758–1829)" (PhD, University of Aberystwyth, 2001); Maxine Berg, "Women's Consumption and the Industrial Classes of

curatorial tradition of fashion and costume history, there is surprisingly little social and gender history of eighteenth-century dress and almost nothing on fashion and the life cycle.¹⁹ This article links the two separate historiographies. It is concerned with the creation of mature femininity through fashionable dress and the paradoxes inherent in that performance. The misogynist attack on dressy older women was pungent, but mature women still had to clothe themselves, and if middling and respectable, never mind polite, genteel, and noble, clothe themselves in conformity with fashion. The risks of being labelled mutton dressed as lamb were halting, as we shall see, but keeping up appearances was vital too. This article examines the interplay of age and fashion, re-creating the distinctive way women of the middling ranks and lesser gentry negotiated the hazards of dressing past one's prime, charting a perilous course between indignity and scorn, on the one hand, and unfashionability and invisibility, on the other. Perceptions of age and aging bore unevenly on the sexes. Nevertheless, deep-seated assumptions about female sartorial retirement and savage depictions of hideous physical decline were powerfully offset by the allurements of the market itself. Women's own correspondence reveals anxious awareness of the hazards of indecorous dress and ready criticism of the errors of others, but it also suggests few were scared into invisibility. Fashion was inescapable but segmented—with distinct looks and accessories for each age group.

Women deemed no longer young lived in an inhospitable climate of visual mockery that impugned their fashionable efforts. Most scornful were the printed caricatures on the theme of "mutton dressed as lamb." The eighteenth century saw an explosion in the production of graphic satires in Britain, modes and manners flowering as a preoccupation in the later century. As Mark Hallett points out, satirical engravings made a spectacle of difference, including gender. Moreover, caricatures on all themes depend on cruel exaggeration and have their own internal conventions.²⁰ Nevertheless, the acid poured on older women was sulphuric. It was the

Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 2 (1996): 415–34. On material culture, see John Styles and Amanda Vickery, eds., *Gender, Taste and Material Culture in Britain and North America* (New Haven, CT, 2006); Karen Harvey, ed., *History and Material Culture: A Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London, 2009); and Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England*.

¹⁹ Much dress history has charted the twists and turns of fashion change at the apex of society. See especially Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe, 1715–1789* (London, 1984) and *Dress and Morality* (London, 1986). But a broad range of society is covered in the classics Anne Buck, *Dress in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1979), and Jane Ashelford, *The Art of Dress: Clothes and Society, 1500–1900* (London, 1996). On clothes and rank, see Susan Vincent, *Dressing the Elite: Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003). Clothes and the poverty cycle are addressed by John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, CT, 2008), and clothes and the life cycle are raised in Linda Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal: The Language of Clothing in Colonial and Federal America* (Williamsburg, 2003). For fashion in textiles, see Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 1991). On gender and the consumption of clothes, among other commodities, see Amanda Vickery, "His and Hers: Gender, Consumption and Household Accounting in Eighteenth-Century England," in *The Art of Survival: Essays in Honour of Ohwen Hufton*, ed. Lyndal Roper and Ruth Harris (London, 2006), 12–38.

²⁰ Mark Hallett, *The Spectacle of Difference: Graphic Satire in the Age of Hogarth* (New Haven, CT, 1998). See also M. Dorothy George, *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, vols. 5–11 (London, 1959); Diana Donald, *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven, CT, 1996).

aging spinster who bore the brunt of the satirical attack. Old maids were often depicted with a dizzying array of accoutrements, but underneath the frills they were androgynous, even monstrous. Age has stolen their femininity and the grave beckons. The horror of female old age is visceral in “A new fashion’d head dress for young misses of three score and ten” of 1777 (see figure 1). It represents a macabre seventy-year-old prettified by two fawning hairdressers—doubtless French (France being the fountain of affectation, and a frenchified persona a common pose among fashionable hairdressers, dancing masters, and upholsterers). All of the physical conventions of aged ugliness are fulfilled—she is bald, toothless, wrinkled, withered, and bony. Regardless, the client flaunts the high fashion of the



Figure 1—Philip Dawe, “A New fashion’d Head Dress for Young Misses of Three score and Ten,” 1777, mezzotint, Lewis Walpole Library 77.05.08.01+. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

1770s—in an elaborately trimmed gown with deep multilayered frills at the elbow, a diaphanous muslin apron, a monstrous wig, and pendant earrings, resembling a bunch of juicy grapes, which mock her own wastage.²¹ She is more witch than woman. Artificial aids like cork rumps, wigs, false eyebrows, toothpaste, powder, and rouge cannot bring back natural beauty to a hag. In an era when women could describe themselves as old at thirty, the image is a chilling warning. Once a woman has outlived her youthful bloom, the image suggests, all efforts to sustain prettiness are not only doomed but also disgusting.

The caricature draws on a persistent painterly fascination with ugliness, crones, and hags, from “The Dead Lovers” (ca. 1470), to Quinten Massys’s “The Ugly Duchess” (ca. 1513), to Goya’s “The Time of the old Women” (ca. 1820).²² The scene is a spiteful reworking of the *vanitas topos*, wherein a Venus performs her toilette for the pleasure of the audience but with *memento mori* props in view to remind us of the fugitive nature of all earthly gifts and to justify the voyeuristic tableau. A classic juxtaposition is the mirror and the skull.²³ The toilette proved an enduring device. In Isaac Cruikshank’s “A maiden ewe drest lamb fashion” of 1796 (see figure 2), the Venus is a bald and wizened spinster. She sports the first neo-Grecian fashion—a high-waisted, muslin gown, accessorized with a cameo of a lusty soldier sweetheart. The manly watch pinned to her breast may belong to her young lover, commemorating a May to November love affair, but it also signals the inexorable march of time. Age could not wither the beautiful Cleopatra whose print adorns the wall, but the ugly old maiden is doomed. If any viewer had missed the point, the subtitle intones: “The end of all these things, is death.”²⁴ Apparently, the only fitting garment for a spinster was a shroud.

Irritation with female dishonesty and disguise was one force at work. By implication, inner bodies and outer appearances once corresponded in a golden age before fashion and luxury, but now who could judge a woman’s flesh by her wrapping? False advertising and male disappointment are the story in Thomas Rowlandson’s “An Old Ewe drest Lamb fashion” of 1810 (see figure 3). The woman in the street looks deceptively lithe from the rear: “[A]s viewed en derriere, you have decided that her face is Angelic, till on eagerly turning round as you pass her—you are petrified by a Gorgon.”²⁵ But an even blacker smear was the implication that fashionable dress served squalid purposes. George Woodward’s etching “Comfort for an old maid” of 1810 presents a berouged crone in fur, fishing for

²¹ Philip Dawe, “A New fashion’d Head Dress for Young Misses of Three score and Ten,” 1777, mezzotint, 777.05.08.01+, Lewis Walpole Library (LWL).

²² Philip Dawe’s mezzotint is an even more vicious reworking of a cruel French engraving, Louis Surugue after Charles Antoine Coypel, “La Folie pare la Décrépitude des ajustements de la Jeunesse,” 1745, British Museum. On the fascination with ugliness, see Naomi Baker, *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture* (Manchester, 2010).

²³ For discussion of an influential toilet scene, see Melissa Hyde, “The ‘Makeup’ of the Marquise: Boucher’s Portrait of Pompadour at Her Toilette,” *Art Bulletin* 82, no. 3 (September 2000): 453–75. For an early juxtaposition of mirror and bones, see Hans Memling, “Earthly vanity and divine salvation triptych,” c.1485.

²⁴ Isaac Cruikshank, “A Maiden Ewe, Drest Lamb Fashion,” 1796, etching and engraving, 796.09.15.0., LWL.

²⁵ Thomas Rowlandson, “An Old Ewe Drest Lamb Fashion,” 1810, hand colored etching, 810.10.25.01.2+, LWL.



Figure 2—Isaac Cruikshank, “A Maiden Ewe, Drest Lamb Fashion,” 1796, etching and engraving, Lewis Walpole Library 796.09.15.01. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

compliments from her servant (see figure 4). “John—how do you like my fashionable Muff and Tippet. [D]on’t you think I look charmingly to day?” she simpers. But the plainspoken Yorkshireman will have none of it. “You look for all the world like a Hog in Armour and I think it a sheame that an Old Woman like you should be running after the Men at your time of life.”²⁶ Honest John shouts what the other caricatures imply—that frills and furbelows are only donned to attract men. Fashion is the despicable equipment of seduction. At the risk of stating the obvious, her “muff” was already slang for her privates.²⁷ Fashionable accoutrements signal sexual appetite—abnormal, offensive, and frantic in women so aged, dry, and unsightly. The satires can be read as a conservative attempt to restore the

²⁶ George Woodward, “Comfort for an Old Maid,” 1810, hand-colored etching, 810.00.00.70+, LWL.

²⁷ *Dictionary of The Vulgar Tongue*, unpaginated, see under “muff.”



Figure 3—Thomas Rowlandson, “An Old Ewe Drest Lamb Fashion,” 1810, hand-colored etching, Lewis Walpole Library 810.10.25.01.2+. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

decorum of aged behavior among the frisky, but they appear fuelled by sheer physical revulsion.

These fashionable old ewes borrowed features from earlier visual and literary depictions of old maids. The lifelong single woman was only really noticed in literary



Figure 4—George Woodward, “Comfort for an Old Maid,” 1810, hand-colored etching, Lewis Walpole Library 810.00.00.70+. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

commentary in the 1600s, but she began to be reviled by the end of the seventeenth century, when “spinster” took on negative connotations. By the eighteenth century, she was stigmatized and scorned.²⁸ “I have mortal Aversion to be an Old maid,” shivered twenty-two-year-old Lady Mary Pierrepont (later Wortley Montagu) in 1707, “and a decayed Oak before my window, leaveless, half rotten and shaking its wither’d Top. Puts me in mind every morning of an Antiquated Virgin, Bald, with Rotten Teeth, and shaking of the Palate.”²⁹ In Lady Mary’s morbid imagination, an old maid was a diseased blot on the landscape, both barren and putrid, but Pierrepont was only echoing a commonplace revulsion.³⁰ Widows were rarely as humiliated as spinsters in satire.³¹ The showy wives of tradesmen could be depicted looking beefy and foolish in ribbons. The lascivious widow was a stock character also. Yet both were usually depicted as more silly than revolting.³² Nevertheless, all older women ran the risk of mockery for perceived immodesty. The visual caricatures had their counterpart in written depictions of “man-hungry spinsters, gigolo-hunting croncs and sex-crazed widows” that appeared in magazines, plays, and novels.³³

None of this is to imply that by contrast the sexual pretensions of aging men were unproblematic for the Georgians. Goaty old men were often ridiculed in visual pornography for their withered potency and mocked for their inability to satisfy and impregnate the nubile hoydens they still ogled. Erotic pamphlets celebrated reproductive sex, potency, and fertility above all, and thus tended to denigrate the shriveled testicles of aged lotharios.³⁴ Yet however diminished and pitiful these past-it lovers, they remained men rather than monsters. Most objectionable were dodderers marrying slips of girls, an offense against nature that could bring down ritual protests in the form of charivari against the old fool. Images such as “The Ridiculous Match” of

²⁸ Amy Froide, *Never Married: Single Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2005), 155.

²⁹ Robert Halsband, ed., *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 3 vols. (1965–67), 1:112. The misogyny is chilling, but Lady Mary’s fears were not groundless because aristocratic spinsterhood ran between 25 and 30 percent in the 1700s. T. H. Hollingsworth, “The Demography of the British Peerage,” *Population Studies* 8, supplement (1964). Of course, many genteel spinsters bore their lot with dignity, fortitude, and resource while managing to express themselves materially. See Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 207–30.

³⁰ *The Rambler*, Sketch of an old Maid, May 1783, 176: “In short an old maid is opposite to everything that nature considers amiable, generous, good, or true. She is the pest of society, a hypocrite amongst men and women, a Pharisee in the eye of heaven and a rank putrid abomination to the deity.”

³¹ The bluestocking Catherine Macaulay was pilloried for having the temerity to both write history and pursue sexual liaisons with men. In yet another toilet scene, Matthew Darly, “A speedy and effectual preparation for the next world,” 1777, engraving, British Museum, the intellectual is depicted applying rouge, oblivious to the skeleton and hearse looming behind her. In fact, Macaulay was still in her forties. However, she was a flamboyant self-publicist, who lived in a ménage with an admirer nearly thirty years her senior until, at the age of forty-seven, she suddenly married a twenty-one-year-old sailor. Her new brother-in-law was a quack doctor who treated impotence. The satirists had a field day.

³² See, for example, Philip Dawe, “The Butcher’s Wife: Dressing for the Pantheon,” W. Humphry, 1772, Mezzotint, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Older women in general were mocked for fashionable pretensions in a range of satires on extreme vagues, from tight stays to extravagant bonnets. See, for example, Anon, “Tight Lacing,” 1777, hand-colored etching, 777.03.05.01.2., LWL. For a general introduction, see McCreery, *Satirical Gaze*, 214–51.

³³ Kittredge, “Ag’d Dame,” 247–65.

³⁴ See Karen Harvey, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture* (Cambridge, 2004), 138–39.

1762 looked askance at the wedding of “Mr Thomas Feeble Esq aged 90 to Miss Frisky aged 16.”³⁵ However, it took an age gap of decades to raise the hackles of the community.

Extravagant fashion in men in inappropriate contexts always risked disdain—whatever the age of the man. A preoccupation with finicky details of dress was the signature of the “fop” of the late seventeenth century, the “macaroni” of the 1760s and 1770s, and the dandy of the early nineteenth century.³⁶ Any obvious obsession with mere externals was incompatible with the dignity of a man of sense. However, there was no male equivalent to “mutton,” no “ram dressed as lamb.” Fertile attractiveness was not the male *raison d’être*. Naturally, men aged too and also deployed clothing strategies to assert virile impressiveness, however mediocre or degenerate the underlying body. A good tailor, according to the *London Tradesman* in 1747, was able “not only to cut for the Handsome and Well-shaped, but to bestow a good Shape where Nature has not designed it.”³⁷ Nevertheless, ordinary masculine artifice escaped the scrutiny of the critical gaze, just as the consumer self-indulgences of mature married men so often went unnoticed by satire.³⁸ As the fashion historian Peter McNeil concludes from portraiture, “[O]ld age in the ancien régime did not demand a relinquishing of fashion for male urban elites, nor would such a position be appropriate.”³⁹ Men in their forties, fifties, and even sixties were not expected to renounce their public roles; in fact, their authority was in its zenith in these decades. A worldly and sartorial renunciation would be absurd. No one expected them to fade into the background when they lost the bloom of fertile attractiveness.

That women were judged entirely on appearances was infuriating to Enlightenment educationalists and feminists, who argued that women should be rational, not decorative. Mary Wollstonecraft contested the double standard that saw female loveliness only in surfaces, while “male beauty is allowed to have some conception of the mind.” But in her attack on the artificiality of femininity enforced by custom, her disdain for “the contagious fondness for dress so common to weak women,” and her horror of the pretensions of “superannuated coquettes,” she reinforced a grotesque misogynist stereotype.⁴⁰

The attack on middle-aged and elderly fashion in women was terrific, but it was contradicted by the equally insistent demands of rank, politeness, and respectability. The history of dress is nothing if not a history of status.⁴¹ Clothes were the most constant and visible manifestation of rank and wealth. Sumptuary law elapsed in

³⁵ Anon, “The Ridiculous Match,” 1768, engraving, 768.7.0.2., LWL.

³⁶ Peter McNeil, “That Doubtful Gender: Macaroni Dress and Male Sexualities,” *Fashion Theory* 3, no. 4 (1999): 411–88; Peter McNeil, “Dissipation and Extravagance: Aging Fops,” in *King Power Designing Masculinities Symposium*, ed. Peter Allen (Melbourne, 2007), 1–17.

³⁷ R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (1747; New York, 1969), 192.

³⁸ On the invisibility of male consumerism despite furtive or even enthusiastic engagement with the world of goods, see Vickery, “His and Hers.”

³⁹ McNeil, “Aging Fops,” 1–2.

⁴⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792; Harmondsworth, 1982), 162, 309.

⁴¹ On clothes and rank, see Vincent, *Dressing the Elite*; Nigel Arch and Joanna Marschner, *Splendour at Court: Dressing for Royal Occasions Since 1700* (London, 1987). On the efforts of the poor, see Styles, *Dress of the People*.

England in 1604,⁴² but the assumption that the hierarchy could and should be read through clothes survived. “Distinction in Habit” confirmed “the different ranks of Mankind,” as one mother and conduct writer reminded her daughter.⁴³ Clothes were universal credentials. If you dressed, looked, and walked like a fashionable gentlewoman, more often than not you would be taken for one. Conversely, being down at heel risked social exile. While in her thirties, Ellen Weeton deliberately adopted “a neat, plain style of dress” in Lancashire in the 1810s, to reflect her straitened finances and modest status as an unmarried governess. Nevertheless, one of her friends refused to take her to church in Liverpool until she had ordered “something fit to appear in” from the mantua maker. Weeton smarted, “To be clothed in rags’ was once a recommendation to the Church of Christ, but now the surest way of being denied entrance into it. Fashion in times of old could no more gain admittance into that Church than a woman into a Turkish Mosque.” Yet for all that, Weeton still spent three days at the dressmaker contriving something “fit to go in.”⁴⁴ Social exclusion and chronic isolation on account of dress were real risks.

Rejection of new modes by women could be seen as absurd rather than high-minded. The evidence of paintings suggests one convention that older women might stick with the fashions of their prime to assert their seriousness, leaving modishness to the younger generations. However, ancient costume could appear idiotic and was a running joke of broad comedy. Certainly, the fictional spinster Tabitha Bramble looked ridiculous to the merciless eyes of youth in Tobias Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker*. Mrs. Tabitha Bramble, a maiden aunt of forty-five, was “twenty good years behind the fashion,” reported a niece who despaired of “her rumpst gown and petticoat, her scanty curls, her lappet head, deep ruffles and high stays.”⁴⁵ The old-fashioned wardrobe matched the vintage coquetry, producing only tittering surprise. Here the ignorance of new styles was evidence of self-delusion, not quiet dignity. By contrast, there were always some middle-aged and old men in life and fiction who took pride in maintaining the modes of their long lost youth, generating affectionate mockery and a reputation for eccentricity.⁴⁶ Yet eccentricity was never valued in Georgian women. There were some public men who exhibited a studied neglect of appearances as a deliberate pose, like the former macaroni Charles James Fox, who became a byword for scruffy informality in middle age.⁴⁷ But slatternly, dirty dress in women betokened polluted virtue, as is clear from the double meaning of “slut.” Women contracted out of fashion at their peril.

Prescriptive advice on appropriate dress was built on the rule of decorum, but it did not assume sartorial retirement for mature women of any status. Advice books for women, as for men, agreed that while an obsession with the superficialities of dress was reprehensible, compliance with prevailing fashion was inescapable—“to

⁴² On sumptuary law, see N. B. Harte, “State Control of Dress and Social Change in Pre-industrial England,” in *Trade, Government and Economy in Pre-industrial England*, ed. D. C. Coleman and A. H. John (London, 1976), 132–65; Vincent, *Dressing the Elite*, 117–43.

⁴³ Sarah Pennington, *An Unfortunate Mother’s Advice to her Daughters*, 2nd ed. (London, 1761), 34.

⁴⁴ *Miss Weeton’s Journal of a Governess*, ed. Edward Hall, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1936–39), 1:122–23, 253.

⁴⁵ Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771; Oxford, 1984), 94.

⁴⁶ For example, a rich Captain Debrissy wore the fashions of the 1670s in 1760s Dublin, and a Mr. Harvey was notable in the 1720s for his black clothes of an “unalterable style” dating back to the mid-seventeenth century. See Mairead Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland: A History* (Cork, 1999), 104.

⁴⁷ McNeil, “Aging Fops,” 9, 9.

avoid the Affectation of singularity.” A lady’s apparel still had to suit her rank and fortune, because dressing down undermined status and confused social hierarchy. The obliteration of distinction was horrible to most commentators. But all advice for women exalted modesty as the essential virtue. A woman whose clothes and manner invited too much male attention was hovering on the brink of dishonor. Propriety counseled against the “extream of fashions” and “ill-placed finery.”⁴⁸ Low necklines were immodest and invited disrespect. Garb that was too mannish or gave an air of masculine confidence was also indecorous. (Ladies in riding dress ran the risk of being hailed as “Sir!”) Breeches were unconscionable. Caricatures of women in breeches signaled a nightmarish world of natural authority turned upside down.⁴⁹

The rule of decorum assumed that dress, accouterments, and manners would vary with age as well as sex, rank, and station.⁵⁰ Most advice to women preached the same homily: “[Dress] ought to be correspondent to the Age,” as Alexander Moro lectured his daughter in 1739. “A Child dressed in the same manner as an old Matron is disagreeable and soon is thought old. An old Woman dressed like a young Girl is deservedly ridiculed for endeavoring to bring back what can never be recalled.”⁵¹ The bluestocking Hester Chapone was conventional in censuring the old who “instead of maintaining the dignity of their years [struggled] against nature to conceal them.” Few things were “as ridiculous as an old woman with a head dress of flowers.”⁵² Gay embellishments befitted virgins on the marriage market, but after the triumphal bridal appearances, it was time to put the fripperies away. The Edinburgh law lord Henry Home, Lord Kames decreed “[F]rom a married woman engaged in family concerns, a more staid behavior is expected than from a young woman before marriage; and consequently a greater simplicity of dress.” Thereafter, he expected women to display their taste in dress on the children.⁵³

Nevertheless, though public show was dimmed and the stage of appearances much circumscribed, there should be no relaxation of the effort to please through appearance. Negligence in dress behind closed doors could be disastrous for marriage, warned John Essex in 1722. He urged wives to avoid appearing “Undress’d or in Dishabillee” at home because it “is of great Importance to preserve and keep alive the Flame of pure Affection . . . for there is nothing, perhaps, gives a Husband Distaste and Chagrine sooner and more effectually, than . . . in shuffling on your Cloaths in a confus’d huddle of Dress.”⁵⁴ Wives had their dignity to defend, but they also had

⁴⁸ Pennington, *Mother’s Advice*, 34; Alexander Monro (Primus), *The Professor’s Daughter: An Essay on Female Conduct Contained in Letters from a Father to His Daughter*, 1739, ed. P. A. G. Monro (Cambridge, 1995), 6–7.

⁴⁹ Even shameless actresses struggled to live down their “brazenness” in breeches parts. Gill Perry, *Spectacular Flirtations: Viewing the Actress in Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture, 1768–1820* (New Haven, CT, 2007); Gill Perry with Joseph Roach and Shearer West, *The First Actresses: Nell Gwynn to Sarah Siddons* (London, 2011).

⁵⁰ On decorum, see F. Childs, “Prescriptions for Manners in English Courtesy Literature, 1690–1760” (DPhil, Oxford, 1984), chap. 3; Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, 53, 137, 144, 177, 181, 220, 260–61, 298.

⁵¹ Monro, *Professor’s Daughter*, 7.

⁵² Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind Addressed to a Young lady* (1773), 169.

⁵³ Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Loose Hints Upon Education, Chiefly Concerning the Culture of the Heart*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1782), 258–59.

⁵⁴ John Essex, *The Young Ladies Conduct* (London, 1722), 100–01.

husbands to gratify. If a wife lost her man to a more seductive dresser, she had only her own sloppy morning clothes to blame. Looking old before one's time was also seen as eccentric. Reportedly, Jane and Cassandra Austen were thought absurd for taking on overly spinsterish garb in their late twenties.⁵⁵ Overall, the rules of dress were contradictory and took considerable discrimination to interpret to one's credit.

How then was a mature woman to comply with fashion, look pleasant, and yet maintain her dignity? This article now moves beyond stereotype, prescription, and gossip to investigate how older women of middling and lesser gentry backgrounds negotiated fashion over the life cycle. The evidence of practice is rich but motley. Inevitably, both literary evidence and preserved garments are biased to the gentry and the nobility. Dress collections in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Bath Fashion museum, the Platt Hall Museum in Manchester, and the Museum of London systematically favor the exquisite over the typical. They were often acquired as objets d'art and examples of workmanship, and are only rarely provenanced to individual women. Curators cannot determine the age of the wearer from the surviving garment alone, while the telling neck and headwear (which declared the dignity of age) never survive with the gown they accompanied.⁵⁶ To my knowledge, no wardrobe of female gowns survives before the nineteenth century. Manuscript correspondence charts female debate about appropriate dress, though matching discussion to surviving garments and concrete designs is tricky. Inventories occasionally offer a snapshot of a wardrobe at one moment in the life cycle, though clothes are rarely itemized.⁵⁷ Account books occasionally exist in long runs, revealing textile purchases over an adult lifetime, but again the look of the outfits is elusive. A sustained visual record of personal dress history rarely survives before the age of photography.⁵⁸

A Buckinghamshire vicar's daughter, Barbara Johnson (1738–1825) kept a fabric swatch for every new dress she had made for seventy-seven years, beginning with “a flowered calico for a long sac, 1745” when she was seven years old and ending with “twelve yards of check sarsnet” of wine and bottle green in 1822 when she was eighty-four.⁵⁹ Johnson's letters criticize female excess. At a ball she noticed, “Lady

⁵⁵ James Edward Austen Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen* (London, 1871), 87–88.

⁵⁶ Personal communication from Susan North and Leslie Miller regarding the Victoria and Albert Museum's holdings in particular, from Miles Lambert regarding Platt Hall, and Linda Baumgarten regarding Colonial Williamsburg.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Sacha Llewellyn, “Inventory of her Grace's things, 1747—the Dress Inventory of Mary Churchill, 2nd Duchess of Montagu,” *Costume* 31 (1997): 49–67. At her death at the age of fifty-eight, the duchess owned 6 formal court outfits, 10 nightgowns, 2 sacks, 5 wrapping gowns, 6 riding habits, an array of mourning wear, 2 informal jackets and petticoats, 7 hoops, 47 handkerchiefs, 11 tippets, 38 aprons, and 61 caps. Green, yellow, and blue silks predominated, but she also had pink, purple, cream, and red.

⁵⁸ A Mary White compiled an album of fashion plates covering the years 1759–1819, with scanty but suggestive manuscript comments such as “disgraceful to English taste” in Manchester City Art Galleries, Platt Hall Gallery of English Costume. A Londoner Laetitia Powell (b 1741), the wife of a Bishopsgate merchant, dressed thirteen fashion dolls between 1754 and 1814, using remnants from her own gowns, documenting “the fashionable full dress for a young lady” of her 1750s girlhood and her wedding suit. Mrs. Powell wedding suit, 1761, W.183:7–1919, Victoria & Albert Museum Stores. The Shelburne Museum in Vermont holds forty-nine sketches of fashions by an anonymous woman documenting the years 1784–1805.

⁵⁹ Nathalie Rothstein, ed., *Barbara Johnson's Album of Fashions and Fabrics* (London, 1987).

Say . . . dresses as youthful as ever, a Yellow Gown with pink Gawz Ornaments, so that she very much resembles a Cousin Betty.” In eighteenth-century slang, a “Cousin Betty” was a strumpet. Whether it was the colors pink and yellow, the clashing combination, or the gauzy ornaments that were tarty is unclear. Presumably, Johnson eschewed immodesty in her own outfits, yet she tracked the twists and turns of fashion very closely into middle age and beyond. She never married. Yet maidenly propriety did not preclude high style. She favored lilac, pink, and garnet silks, and fresh flowered chintz in her thirties (in the late 1760s and 1770s), and in her forties and fifties (in the 1780s and 1790s), she still wore rose pink taffeta and many dark calicos with pink flowers or figures.⁶⁰ The dull black stuffs, matt bombazines, nonshiny silks, and dark gray poplins of mourning (for the Prince of Wales, for her mother, father, uncle, and brothers) punctuated her wardrobe from beginning to end. On the choices of Johnson’s old age, silk curator Nathalie Rothstein concludes: “She had some plain materials, all but one sarcenets, as well as a number of dark ground chintzes with fairly minimal patterns. [But] . . . this was fashion and not the prudent restraint of an aging lady.”⁶¹ However, I would argue that Barbara Johnson’s choices do reveal some style refusals of a piece with mature prudence. Throughout her album, she inserted the annual fashion illustrations often included with ladies’ pocket books. The fashion illustrations in the second half of her album depicted light, filmy gowns, with only occasional peripheral figures depicted in darker dress. But Johnson herself eschewed the diaphanous muslins of the Regency. Some versions of fashion were left untried. However, no amount of negative commentary could extinguish her lifelong love of pink.

A similar picture of discriminating fashionability sustained even into what was seen as extreme old age arises from the account books of Martha Dodson (1684–1765), of Cookham in Berkshire, widow of a rich tin-plate man. The accounts commence in June 1746, when Mrs. Dodson was sixty-two and already sixteen years a widow, and span the last nineteen years of her life, ending three months before her death in 1765 at the age of eight-one. With recorded purchases of mahogany, chintz, wallpapers, Wilton bed carpet, and Rococo china, the accounts conjure affluence, domestic comfort, and decorative pleasure.⁶² Dress curator Edwina Ehrman concludes that “[Dodson’s] wardrobe was that of an older woman who respected the social customs of her class, and who balanced the purchase of new goods with economy, and an awareness of fashion with decorum.” At sixty-four, Mrs. Dodson acquired a green damask mantua (an impressive formal garment worn with a hoop associated with court and fashionable entertainments), arguing that this city widow still intended to show herself. For silks, she went at least once to perhaps the chicest supplier in London—the mercer Carr of Ludgate Hill. New silk and silk mix gowns were acquired in gray, brown, blue-striped, “enameled,” “changeable,” silver, flowered, striped, and flowered grey, pink and brown, and red and white. Of her cotton and linen gowns, some were white or blue, and one was a striped pink, but after 1754, when she turned seventy, six out of eight of them were purple. Purple was an exalted color associated with royal mourning and often

⁶⁰ See for example, Rothstein, *Barbara Johnson*, 10–11, 15.

⁶¹ Rothstein, “Textiles in the Album,” in *Barbara Johnson*, 33.

⁶² Martha Dodson’s Account Book, 1746–1765, Museum of London.

seen as somber and dignified, but it was less harsh than black. Many of the widow's informal garments were brown and blue. The balance of Mrs. Dodson's wardrobe was dark or comparatively unassuming, but it was still made of the finest fabrics city money could buy.⁶³

Account books record only economic transactions and are mute on the ideological negotiations around clothes. A sense of the balance of factors in play for mature women emerges most clearly from the correspondence of provincial outsiders. The view from the middling and genteel in Cornwall, Bedfordshire, and Lancashire evokes the frisson of fashion and considerable caution around novelty, as well as a powerful sense of sartorial obligation.

Visiting Bath for his gout with his fifty-four-year-old wife in 1766, Cornish vicar John Penrose affected disbelief at the demands of fashion. "Your Mamma is the only old woman in Town," he reported back to one of his daughters. "Ladies without teeth, without Eyes, with a foot and a half in the grave, ape young and dress themselves forth with the fantastic Pride of eighteen or twenty. Even the Sexton's daughter wears a wired cap and dresses like a Woman of Fashion." He especially abominated "painting an inch thick" on the face, and lice-ridden hair styles set to last for three months, reiterating the truism that under the varnish fine ladies were filthy and unwholesome: "[T]hey look so much worse for taking the pains to adorn themselves. If they were in a state of inaction, they would look like so many rotten posts gilded." Penrose saw with the eyes of the natural sermonizer, but for good or ill, his wife and accompanying daughter had to respond to the challenge. Young Fanny was under self-imposed house arrest at first because their luggage was delayed. "I hope our clothes will come tonight or I know not what I shall do." She soon rose to the occasion in lace tippet, tucker, white hat trimmed with blue ribbons, and a home-made apron, presenting as "smart appearance as most at Bath." Even sensible Mrs. Elizabeth Penrose, one of nature's "gravest matrons," bought a new bonnet, cloak, and striped gauze apron, though "not a la Mode Bath," insisted her husband. The strain of keeping up appearances tired Darby and Joan. They were only at ease in gentleman's "Night Gown" and "Ladies Dishabille" in the privacy of their lodgings: "[W]e began to unrig as soon as the coast was clear: for tis very disagreeable to be all day dressed in form."

Cornwall was a notoriously old-fashioned county, second only to Cumberland as a byword for rusticity. In their letters, the Penroses presented themselves as virtuous country mice beset by the vanities of town. The parson's wife made external concessions to fashion, but she emerged with her good sense and dignity intact. The duties of show were displaced onto young Fanny—the family's avowed "fashion monger."⁶⁴ In boasting of his wife's imperviousness to frivolous modes, Penrose asserted his wife's moral worth.

The obligations of respectable middle age were also canvassed among a Bedfordshire network of genteel correspondents. Margaret Cater was a mature matron of

⁶³ Edwina Ehrman, "Dressing Well in Old Age: The Clothing Accounts of Martha Dodson, 1746–1765," *Costume* 40 (2006): 28–38.

⁶⁴ Brigitte Mitchell and Hubert Penrose, eds., *Letters from Bath, 1766–1767 by the Rev John Penrose* (Stroud, 1983), 25, 28, 39, 49, 58, 68, 86, 181. The sartorial adjustments the family were forced to make are discussed in Suzanne Adams, "Purchasers from the Parsonage: Observations on Bath Dress and Reactive Shopping by the Penrose Family, 1766–1767," *Costume* 39 (2005): 79–90.

lesser gentry background who lived in Kempston, a village outside Bedford. She relied on a London friend as proxy consumer for herself and her growing daughters. Her attention to dress codes was manifest in her search for seemly mourning: "It is for a 4th Cousin so desire you will send what, upon enquiry, is thought most proper, and genteel, whether musling or Gauze. I woud wish to pay every possible respect to her memory."⁶⁵ Mrs. Cater contemplated her own mortality, but she remained an active consumer nevertheless, ordering the same silk to make hoods for herself and her daughters.⁶⁶ In 1776, she pontificated, "[T]here is no distinction in the silent grave towards which we are all hastening!" but then proceeded to order a cloak from London. "I woud have it a handsome one so shall enclose money in this to pay for it. I am told they are worn this winter with arm holes but I am sure if your mother gets it 'twill be genteel." She decided to have it made in London too "as I don't think much is saved by making them at Home. As if I live it will last me a great while."

The most sustained discussion of fashion requirements over the life cycle comes from the correspondence network of Elizabeth Parker, later Shackleton (1726–81). Elizabeth Parker was born in London, the daughter of a linen draper, but she moved to Browsholme hall in Lancashire when her father inherited. She married a second cousin of a modest gentry fortune and established herself at Alkincoats Hall outside Colne in Lancashire. She was left a widow at thirty-two with three sons under five in 1758. But seven years later, she provoked local scandal by eloping to Gretna Green with a neighboring callimanco merchant, John Shackleton, seventeen years her junior: twenty-one to her thirty-eight. Throughout her adult life, friends and relations in London, Preston, and Pontefract kept Elizabeth up to date with "the reigning taste" and fulfilled many of her commissions "in the fashion way." Lawyer's wife Jane Scrimshire thought it was "antiquated" to expect grown women to renounce fashion. She anticipated disapproval "that a marry'd woman and a Mother of Children [should] talk of Dress but these my Dr Friend are Antiquated Notions & were you here you wo'd find women of sixty and seventy just as anxious about [dress] as formerly girls were at 18."⁶⁷ Mrs. Shackleton was as interested in fashion news in her forties as she had been in her twenties. Indeed, with a twentysomething husband at home, she can hardly have given up on appearances. Maturity colored fashion choices, but it was not the end of fashionable dressing.

Fashion was believed to originate in London, first exhibited at court and in exclusive public venues, but its dissemination across the provinces and ranks was not automatic. All elite metropolitan vogues were subject to critique and a process of filtering. The middling and genteel ranks were more likely to adopt designs that might be considered "becoming," "in character," "prettiest for us Mothers," "an Easy Fashion," "much genteeler among the better sort," or "the Genteelest thing," while fabrics had to suit the season, in fast colors that would endure: "[W]e co'd have brought a more beautiful grey, but the brightest of 'em fades as soon as ink." A variety of

⁶⁵ Williamson letters, M/10/4/54, Bedfordshire Record Office (hereafter BRO).

⁶⁶ Margaret Cater to Mrs. Williamson, 25 Nov 1776, M/10/4/36, BRO. See also Margaret Cater to Mrs. Williamson, 15 Nov 1778, M/10/4/55, BRO.

⁶⁷ J. Scrimshire, Pontefract to E Parker, Alkincoats, 22 Oct 1753, DDB/72/123, Lancashire Record Office (hereafter LRO).

criteria structured Parker Shackleton's dress choices—broad compliance with new modes, durability, versatility (the Pennines were not St. James after all), aesthetic appeal, and suitability to size and figure, as well as the dignity and decency befitting a matron of the lesser gentry and commercial elite.

As a bride of twenty-five in 1751, Elizabeth Parker wore a Spitalfields brocade of rich flowers on a cream ground, bought from the ultrafashionable mercer Hinchcliffe and Croft of Covent Garden at a cost of eighteen guineas.⁶⁸ As a new mother in 1754, she was recommended one of the new negligees in “a very pretty light tabby” by her aged aunt Pellet, a physician's widow, who lived in genteel lodgings in Westminster and Kensington. The new look gown was to be worn without a hoop and a with “a white gauze fichu . . . which is the high fash to throw over yr neck.” To reassure her niece, Pellet exaggerated “even ladies of 90 years of Age have rarely any other sorts of garments.” But it seems the young matron balked at the new silhouette, sticking with the older model of a long trailing sack back dress with hoop, which Aunt Pellet conceded was “much more noble as well as a more becoming dress for ladies.” However, Jane Scrimshire reported that the reign of the hoop was ending—even in Pontefract. “As we are the metropolis of politeness I can't help informing you we have left of our hoops except in high dress.” Indeed, she continues, “I have not had a hoop on this year and a half.”⁶⁹ By the next year, Elizabeth Parker had succumbed and accepted the negligee—much to Pellet's relief—making up the loose dress in a blue and silver fabric. “[The negligee] will be of great use as being the most worn of any garment.”⁷⁰ Here the old metropolitan widow was more fashion-forward than the young gentry wife. Yet Mrs. Pellet also stressed fashion's capacity for multiple adaptation according to age, writing, “The cap will please it being the most modey—the ends of which is to tie round the neck for a ruff, but if you think it too small you may as elderly ladies wear a little round cap under it but the very young ones wear no cap at all only their hair braided with ribbands.”⁷¹

Elizabeth's fashion information during the 1760s and the 1770s, when she was in her late thirties and forties, came from her unsinkable cousin Bessy Ramsden, the wife of a Charterhouse schoolmaster and mother of four. Mrs. Ramsden adored fashion but had a strong sense of the middling proprieties. She counseled against the fashionable décolleté in the spring of 1765 given Elizabeth's status: “[F]or you know it would not be thought decent for a widow with Children to show so much nakedness.”⁷² Still, the schoolmaster's wife took for granted that fashion served different generations at once. In 1776, she reported, “[T]he present dress for young and middle age ladies is the Italian nightgown which I suppose you

⁶⁸ The bill describes the silk as “New flowered gro'd Gros detour Broc'd Column.” A remnant is held in the Kay-Shuttleworth collection, Gawthorpe Hall, Lancashire, and reproduced in Jane Ashelford, *The Art of Dress: Clothes and Society, 1500–1914* (London, 1996), 156.

⁶⁹ J. Scrimshire, Pontefract to E Parker, Alkincoats, 9 Sept n.y., DDB/72/137, LRO; J. Scrimshire, Pontefract to E Parker, 24 June n.y., DDB/72/147, LRO. Scrimshire advised Parker to adapt her formal sack to get more use out of it: “[M]ake it for a hoop for the brides visit and then only take some of the fullness out of the sides and it is a negligee.” J. Scrimshire, Pontefract to E Parker, 20 June n.y., DDB/72/13, LRO. Tabby is a strong plain weave silk. In heavier weights it was suitable for stays.

⁷⁰ A. Pellet, London, to E. Parker, Alkincoats, 1 June 1754, DDB/72/91, LRO.

⁷¹ Bowen/Pellet London to E. Parker, 11 June 1754, DDB/72/92, LRO.

⁷² Bessy Ramsden, Charterhouse, to Mrs. Parker, Alkincoats, 30 March 1765, DDB/72/184, LRO.

have in your part of the world. . . . Negligees will be worn by elderly people with ruffle cuffs.”⁷³ So racy twenty years earlier, the negligee was now so accepted as to be geriatric. However, Mrs. Ramsden herself rejected the Italian nightgown as too juvenile for a Charterhouse matron, so much so “that now except such matrons as your humble servant the ladies all look like misses in robe coats.” Bessy also considered the polonaise, a gown that mimicked the tucked up garb of the milkmaid and revealed the ankles, inappropriate for the mature. “The mantua maker says polonaise are much worn by young ladies. People of all ages wear them.” But the city matron thought the pastoral nymph look not quite “in character” for “one of my age.”⁷⁴

Informality has ever been more nerve-racking to interpret and hazardous to perform than formality. The nightgown, the polonaise, and the negligee, like the sack before them, all arose as informal gowns without hoops associated with relaxed intimacy in private in the mornings. This “undress” breathed a charming air of studied negligence to the chic, but to conservative eyes it might look too casual for public events and too loose for dignified maturity. Disorderly dress was a well-established visual signifier of disorderly conduct. The loose trailing gown was even christened the “trollopée.” Nevertheless, despite all the commentary on the profusion of fashion faux pas, the cumulative impression of middling correspondence is of an abundance of models and an embarrassment of choices. Or as Bessy Ramsden assured her northern cousin, “[T]here is so much variety that it is just what people like.”⁷⁵ These letters testify to the availability of fashions for the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly, but they also reveal that appropriate chic was a fast-moving target. Consumers had to process a teeming abundance of fashion images, news, and advertisements, but these were rarely specified by age, so information and comparison with, as well as reassurance from, friends and relatives was crucial to arrive at an appropriate result.

The sober middling ranks were not slavish followers of every fashion. Their careful discrimination and tempered engagement has long been accepted.⁷⁶ Nor were the meanings of clothing confined to those promoted by market trends. For middle-aged and older women, clothes might offer some armor and comfort amid the mortifications of the flesh. In her fifty-third year, Elizabeth Shackleton felt intimations of mortality, but she used glossy wool to warm her shivers and bolster her morale. “I now have only five teeth in all in my head” she confessed to her diary in 1779. (Toothlessness was a key sign of aging for the Georgians.) “I left off my old stays & put on my best stays for Good. I left off my very old green quilted Callimanco Petticoat and put on my new drab Callimanco quilted petticoat for good. God Grant me my health to wear it & do well.”⁷⁷ She was to meet her end two years later, but she would at least greet the reaper in quality new clothes.

One strong theme of the attack on “mutton dressed as lamb” was the deceitful yet ultimately ineffective use of cosmetics to prolong the mirage of youth, or as

⁷³ E. Ramsden, Charterhouse, to E. Shackleton, Alkincoats, 12 November 1776, DDB/72/288, LRO.

⁷⁴ B. Ramsden, Charterhouse, to E. Shackleton, Alkincoats, 12 November 1776, DDB/72/288, LRO; B. Ramsden and W. Ramsden, Charterhouse, to E. Shackleton, Alkincoats, n.d., DDB/72/285, LRO.

⁷⁵ William and Bessy Ramsden to E. Shackleton, 3 April 1766, DDB/72/191, LRO.

⁷⁶ See A. Vickery, “Women and the World of Goods,” 274–301.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Shackleton’s Diary (1779), DDB/81/35, f. 73, LRO.

Parnell's "Elegy to an Old Beauty" sighed, "In vain, poor nymph, to please our youthful sight, You sleep in cream and frontlets all the night."⁷⁸ The unloveliness of the paraphernalia of female beautification was a well-worn trope, established in Alexander Pope's account of Belinda's sluttish dressing table in "The Rape of the Lock" (1714) and Jonathan Swift's disgust at "The Lady's Dressing Room" (1730). The women who painted their faces were often presented as unclean and dissipated as well as artificial—"rotten posts gilded." The catalog of grisly beauty aids attributed to old women suggested the foul ingredients of the witch's lair, not a dowager's bedroom. "Take care of my bosom and don't rumple it—lay my eye in the dressing box, and the row of teeth by the side of it—and call in again for my eyebrows," orders the bald crone in Woodward's "Celia Retiring" of 1803 (see figure 5).⁷⁹

Despite the abomination of moralists, the evidence of bills, advertisements, and correspondence suggests that the use of theatrical makeup of white lead and rouge was normal among the nobility, though it fluctuated in fashion. After all, one of the flaming beauties of the age Maria, Countess of Coventry (formerly Miss Gunning) hastened her end through cosmetic lead poisoning. Recipe books and manuals abounded with "universal remedies" promising "to help *Nature's defects* by Art . . . that will fortify your faces against the further injuries of Deformity," implying that only a dolt would reject "the sprucifying Advantages."⁸⁰ A comprehensive study of the Georgian beauty industry is beyond the scope of this article, but women like men could resort to medical cures, lotions, and potions; white lead face paint; mascara, kohl, and beauty spots; curling tongs, headpieces, and hair dyes; and cork cheek plumpers, as well as fashionable dentistry and false teeth of gleaming porcelain or ivory. Rouge came in every color from bright red to palest pink.⁸¹ None of the middling women studied here admitted to employing any artificial beauty aids beyond hairdressing, lotions, perfumes, and powder. One can

⁷⁸ Thomas Parnell, "Elegy to an Old Beauty" (1722). Frontlets were leather straps that purported to smooth away wrinkles.

⁷⁹ George Woodward, "Celia Retiring," 1803, hand-colored etching, 803.00.00.13+, LWL. For further discussion, see McCreery, *Satirical Gaze*, 235–36.

⁸⁰ A bill presented to Duke of Bedford for French cosmetics purchased by his fourteen-year-old daughter included face and hair powder, curling tongs, hair grease (both goose grease and bear grease), products for lips and eyes, boxes for patches and pestles, and pots for mixing and storing makeup. See G. Scott Thomson, *The Russells in Bloomsbury, 1669–1771* (1940). Judith Noel requested her sister Mary buy "a Pot of Pale Rouge from Ogilvies" in 1783 and asked in 1785, "Pray how do they do the Curls? & how many of each side? Is it true that they are hung like a Cork Screw? I have shaved my head for an inch deep on the forehead to make it come quicker." Malcolm Elwin, ed., *The Noels and the Millbankes: Their Letters for 25 Years, 1767–92* (London, 1967), 220, 258. For recipes, see *The Ladies Dictionary: Being a General Entertainment for the Fair Sex* (London, 1694), 220, 227. On hair, see also 208–13, and on powders and perfumes, 399.

⁸¹ The manufacture of beauty has not received much serious attention from historians. For a narrative overview, see M. Angeloglou, *A History of Makeup* (1970); Aileen Ribeiro, *Facing Beauty: Painted Women and Cosmetic Art* (New Haven, CT, 2011). For rouge and fashion, see C. Willett Cunnington and Phillis Cunnington, *Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1957), 388; Ribeiro, *Facing Beauty*, 81, 182. For ambivalence around painted blushes, see Rosenthal, "Visceral Culture"; Ruth Yeazell, *Modesty*, 65–80. On artificial smiles, see Colin Jones, "French Dentists and English Teeth in the Long Eighteenth Century: A Tale of Two Cities and One Dentist," in *Medicine, Madness and Social History*, eds. Roberta Bivins and John V. Pickstone (Basingstoke, 2007), 73–89.



Figure 5—George Woodward, “Celia Retiring,” 1803, hand-colored etching, Lewis Walpole Library 803.00.00.13+. Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

imagine a volcanic response from the Reverend Penrose were a pot of rouge to materialize in his Cornish parsonage. However, subtle and surreptitious use of cosmetics seems likely among worldlier families.

The rituals of beautification probably played a role in the life of any woman who had a public face. Beauty preparations are at least as old as the pyramids. Silver toilet sets of up to thirty pieces were common marriage gifts to Stuart noblewomen, while looking glasses proliferated in middling homes from the turn of the seventeenth century. The dressing table and its tackle was already a fixture of the affluent

bedroom.⁸² It was possible to regard the mysterious equipment of womanliness with more humorous indulgence. The civil servant John Byng liked to complain that he was besieged by the sheer femininity of his wife and daughters. “My chief trouble arises from living in the midst of powder, perfumes, caps, hats, gloves, gauze and petticoats,” he muttered in 1782, “of which cost and profusion, no batchelor can, or shou’d have, the smallest idea.”⁸³ But Byng’s long-suffering critique also suggests quite another conclusion—that the fabrication of femininity was a culture shared between women of different ages. It seems inherently unlikely that women happily renounced the practices of an adult lifetime when they turned thirty-nine. To do so was tantamount to declaring that they were no longer women.

Modern gourmets say that mutton can be delicious, but most critiques of dressing lamb fashion were built on the conviction that the mutton itself is repulsive. For Katharine Kittredge, the literary attacks project the assumption that “the female body beyond the age of twenty-five must be grotesque,” that mature sexiness is an oxymoron, and that sexual desire in women beyond childbearing years is deviant and perhaps even monstrous. The stridency of the rejection of sexual wiles bespeaks a strong taboo, but it also intimates the subterranean endurance of sexual activity beyond the childbearing years.⁸⁴ True beauty might belong only to virgins, but even a sweep of notable love affairs suggests the workings of sexual attraction were not so easily policed by decorum. Demonstrably, some women past the first flush of youth held their own on the battlefield of appearances. There were flattering portraits of elegant wives and handsome widows in many a genteel family gallery; commissioned artists of any prudence were sympathetic to the dignity and intelligence of the sitter. A portrait painter was paid to produce the image his patron desired. Likely every circle had its mature style leaders who carried off fashion with subtlety or panache.

It was possible to follow fashion while skirting the most dangerous pitfalls. Amid general agreement on the vulgarity of ultramodishness in the mature, gossip singled out décolletage; obvious makeup, especially rouge; ribbons; ruffles; flounces; elaborate headdresses, as well as bare headedness; the color pink; and anything too French. As the acknowledged capital of European luxury and fashion, Paris was often deplored as the headquarters of the affectations and accoutrements of preposterous femininity, “or paint, patches, powder, silks, diamonds & flirting airs,” as the manufacturer Matthew Boulton espied in the Tuilleries in 1763.⁸⁵ Pink was highly fashionable in eighteenth-century Europe—one of the few elements of decoration the Chinese adopted from the West—but some argued it should be the preserve of blooming youth. Pink invoked the rosebud and the maiden’s blush. Rich daughters on the brink of betrothal or marriage were often painted in pink silk.⁸⁶ The

⁸² On silver for the dressing table, see Michael Snodin and John Styles, *Design and the Decorative Arts: Britain, 1500–1900* (London, 2001), 141, 144. On mirrors, see Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760* (London, 1988), 10, 28, 30, 41, 207, 169, 172, 175, 177, 189. Exquisite dressing table furniture, mostly French, is discussed in Ribeiro, *Facing Beauty*, 166–67, 176.

⁸³ John Beresford, ed., *The Torrington Diaries, containing the Tours through England and Wales of the Hon John Byng*, 4 vols. (London, 1934), 1:91.

⁸⁴ Kittredge, “Ag’d Dame,” 260.

⁸⁵ Matthew Boulton, Paris, to Nanny Boulton, 1 December 1763, MS 3782/16/1/F 28, Birmingham Central Library.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Thomas Hudson, “The Thistlethwayte family,” c. 1758, and Thomas Gainsborough, “Mary Little, later Lady Carr,” c. 1763, Yale Center for British Art. Pink was a bridal hue (along

gentlewoman Mary Delany, an oracle of Georgian taste, considered pink unsuitable at age fifty-two, which she considered very old, in 1752. “I own I think there is a time of life as well as station when very gaudy entertainments are as unbecoming, as pink colour and pompadours!”⁸⁷ In the same decade, Lady Jane Coke indicted pink with other ludicrous prettifications of elderly fashion.

One thing is new, which is, there is a not such a thing as a decent old woman left, everybody curls their hair, shews their neck and wears pink, but your humble servant, People who have covered their heads for forty years now leave of their caps and think it becomes them, in short we try to out-do our patterns, the French in every ridiculous vanity.⁸⁸

Pink ribbons were a particular provocation to the self-styled philosopher on old maids, William Hayley, in 1786. He mocked every old maid “who arrays herself in ornaments of this colour, as a vessel displaying signs of distress, and inviting every bold adventurer to come to her relief.”⁸⁹ The humble ribbon is denounced as the rigging of the aging and deluded flirt.

It was often the trimmings rather than the clothes themselves that drew most of the mockery, which was potentially infuriating to stylish dames because fashion change itself was most easily and inexpensively registered in accouterments—via ribbons, handkerchiefs, and headgear. Accessories allowed a woman to retrim an old dress for the fraction of the cost of making a new gown.⁹⁰ To brand a taste for millinery as illegitimate in middle age was to exclude vast swathes of the female population from affordable fashion. Yet the evergreen gossip about “lamb fashion” is itself testimony to the visibility of the flamboyant and uncowed. The Lancashire letters froth with information on frills. The richest and perhaps most confident woman of the era, the author and literary hostess Elizabeth Montagu, chose to be painted in shimmering pink, foamy lace, and a pink rose on her bosom in her forties in 1762.⁹¹ The clergyman’s daughter Barbara Johnson never forswore pink, although she subdued it with darker backgrounds in advanced old age. Tastes and interpretations must be allowed to vary. What looked like “mutton” to some eyes might look dashing to others.

Much of the commentary reproduced here has revealed female assertiveness in fashion. However, this is not to imply that women dressed only for the applause

with blue, cream, white, and silver) judging by surviving wedding dresses from the 1770s. See Edwina Ehrman, *The Wedding Dress: 300 Years of Bridal Fashion* (London, 2011), 35. However, the textile tokens left with infants at the London foundling hospital demonstrate that pink was not yet especially linked to little girls among the poor. John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital’s Textile Tokens, 1740–1770* (London, 2010), 48, and <http://www.threadsoffeeeling.com/>.

⁸⁷ Lady Llanover, *Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Gramville, Mrs Delany*, 6 vols. (London, 1861–62), ser 1, 3:110.

⁸⁸ Ambrose Rathbone, ed., *Letters of Lady Jane Coke to her friend Mrs Eyre at Derby, 1747–1758* (London, 1899), 134–35.

⁸⁹ William Hayley, *A Philosophical, Historical and Moral Essay on Old Maids*, 3 vols. (London, 1786), 1: 56.

⁹⁰ See John Styles, “Involuntary Consumers? The Eighteenth-Century Servant and Her Clothes,” *Textile History* 33, no. 1 (2002): 14.

⁹¹ Allan Ramsay, “Elizabeth Montagu,” 1762.

of men or to claim that pioneering ladies of a certain age self-consciously defied misogynist caricature by maintaining their attractiveness into their forties and fifties—though it is easy enough to understand if some made the attempt, because physical allure was the only genuine qualification for public presence for women of no rank in the eyes of most reactionary men. Still, it is important to register a powerful countervailing tradition of piety that preached the cultivation of inner grace instead of superficial charm, spiritual pride rather than physical pleasure. Beauty is only skin deep after all. Doubtless, there were many devout women who thought battling the onset of old age was frivolous and rather drew on their fortitude to endure it. Lady Sarah Cowper thought postmenopausal sex “a beastly end” and despised women who displayed their withered charms at an age when it was the time to “shutt up shop” and leave off “such vanities or affectations of superfluities which signifies nothing but weakness.”⁹² Perhaps there were many women like the American Elizabeth Drinker who looked forward to the end of their fertility and the dawning of a new epoch. “I have often thought that women who get over the time of Child-bareing, if other things are favourable to them, experience more comfort and satisfaction than at any other period in their lives.” Possibly some rejoiced in the relaxation of strain—like the housekeeper of a Virginia governor who said of her new stays, “I don’t mind the fashion if they are made easy and full in the stomick” or sensible Mrs. Penrose who ached for her dressing gown.⁹³

Many fifty-year-olds settled down to the sober costume of family matriarch or venerable but unassuming old lady. The obsession with household duty and a residual reverence for old age meant that both were irreproachable roles: “Age itself is not unamiable. While it is yet preserved clean and unsullied: like a piece of metal kept smooth and bright, we look on it with more pleasure than on a new vessel that is cankered with rust.”⁹⁴ The cultivation of personal moral prestige and its demonstration through clothes, especially the veiled head evoking both biblical virtue and the stoic irreproachability of the Roman matron, was an appealing course for the risk averse. (Pious dress and the moral economy of clothes is an important topic that lies beyond the scope of this article.)⁹⁵ It was easy enough, however, to order a fashionable dress in a sober color and don a seemly veil in the prettiest lace. Modest caps and neckwear counterbalanced sumptuous silks in compassionate portraits of older women.⁹⁶

The claims of wealth and nobility ran counter to the moral and medical timetable of proper aging. The demands of rank often trumped the wariness of middle age. Most commentators agreed that the nobility lived by different sartorial rules, which were not a model for everywoman: “[T]he above is indeed the present tast

⁹² Kugler, “Decay Apace,” 73.

⁹³ Cited in Baumgarten, *What Clothes Reveal*, 174.

⁹⁴ James Forrester, *A Present for a Son* (London, c.1775), 191.

⁹⁵ “Dress gave form to a society’s ideas about the sacred and the secular.” Vincent, *Dressing the Elite*, preface. Piety and materialism is potentially an enormous subject, but see Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (London, 1986); Edwina Ehrman, *Dressed Neat and Plain: The Clothing of John Wesley and His Teaching on Dress* (London, 2003); Leigh Eric Schmidt, “A Church Going People Are a Dress Loving People: Clothes, Communication and Religious Culture in Early America,” *Church History* 58, no. 1 (1989): 36–51; Geoffrey Plank, “The First Person in Anti-slavery Literature: John Wolman, His Clothes and His Journal,” *Slavery and Abolition* 30, no. 1 (2009): 67–91.

⁹⁶ See, for example, George Beare, “Portrait of an elderly lady and a girl,” 1747, Yale Center for British Art.

and I am sorry to say much run in to by people of no rank.” The higher up the social pyramid, the dressier a mature woman was allowed to be. Witness the gentlewoman Ann Parker’s admiration of the “Well Looking Men & Well Dress’d Women” disporting themselves at the Preston assemblies in the 1770s:

Lady Egerton had on . . . a Primrose Couler Lutestring trim’d with Purple & white Tiffany—Her Head was a Blaze of Jewels. . . . Mrs Standish much Bediamonded [her] Gown White Lutestring trim’d with Painted Gauze very beautiful.—My sack was a Peach Bloom Couler lutestring trim’d with flounces of Minionet Lace—a Cap quite in the new taste—Call’d a Ranelagh Cap a brilliant sprig to the front & Nine brilliant stars in my hair. . . . I felt fine & I really believ I look’d so.

Not one of these women let matrimony dim her down or abandoned the colors of her virginity. “Mrs Hesketh of Tulketh was Dress’d in a jonquill Couler Lutestring. I remember having just such an other when I was sixteen.”⁹⁷ The nobility (only 160 families at the beginning of the eighteenth century) and the greater gentry were only a tiny fraction of the population of England and Wales (about five and a half million in 1700 and nine million in 1801), but their visibility and influence on the fashion industry was hugely disproportionate.

Noblewomen had to show themselves at court ad nauseam or risk insult to the Crown. Hannah Greig notes no reduction of expenditure on court dress by age, although it tended to be the newlyweds, especially earls and countesses, who were keenest to dazzle in a bid to secure a promotion during their lifetimes. Old duchesses might rest a little more on their sartorial laurels. Court dress settled into a fossilized version of early eighteenth-century full dress, with wide hoops and long lappets, starkly at odds with cutting-edge fashion from the 1760s; however, it was nothing if not high profile.⁹⁸ Moreover, the wives and dowagers of the Beau Monde still reigned at chic public venues like the opera, the Pantheon, and the pleasure garden, and their costumes were detailed in the London newspapers.⁹⁹ Nubile youth was the sine qua non of loveliness for everywoman, but rank, prominence, silks, and diamonds sustained the formal compliment of “beauty” long into middle age for duchesses.¹⁰⁰ Not that any woman, even a duchess, was safe from scorn. John Fitzpatrick, Second Earl of Upper Ossory, smirked at the reinvigorated socializing of the sixty-five-year-old duchess of Bedford chaperoning her granddaughters in the 1770s, likening her to Bélise in Moliere’s *Femmes Savantes* (1672)—a vain, elderly aunt who believed herself irresistible to men: “[I]t is the joke of all the town at least tho we did all we could to keep the secret.”¹⁰¹ She was vilified

⁹⁷ A. Parker, Royle, to Mrs. Shackleton, c.1775, DDB Ac 7886, no 24, LRO. Lutestring is a light, crisp, plain silk with a high shine.

⁹⁸ Hannah Greig, “Dressing for Court: Sartorial Politics and Fashion News in the Age of Mary Delany,” in *Mrs Delany and Her Circle*, ed. Mark Laird and Alicia Weisberg Roberts (New Haven, 2009), 80–93. See also Arch and Marschner, *Splendour at Court*.

⁹⁹ Hannah Greig, “‘All Together and all Distinct’: Public Sociability and Social Exclusivity in London’s Pleasure Gardens, ca.1740–1800,” *Journal of British Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 2012): 50–75.

¹⁰⁰ By convention, duchesses were always “beautiful.” See Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford, 2013), 167–91.

¹⁰¹ John Fitzpatrick, 2nd Earl of Upper Ossory, Ampthill Park, to Thomas Robinson, 25 June 1778, Wrest Park, L 30/14/138/8, BRO. I thank Hannah Greig for this reference.

in print for refusing “to quit the scene; night after night, presenting thy emaciated, withered form at different places of amusement, and exposing thyself to the sarcastic jests, and unfeeling ridicule of the titled coxcombs who surround thee.” She had sacrificed her claim to deferential gallantry. “Age, when thus disfigured, loses all claim to that respect which otherwise it would command; and satire is justly and honourably employed.” Duchesses were still women and so like their humbler sisters vulnerable to insult on their looks. Ageist misogyny was a natural fact of life. “It appears in general that age is more disgusting in woman than in man.”¹⁰²

The charismatic rule breaker and fashion leader Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, suffered more than her share of scatological abuse from satirists. She was expressly advised to tone down her dress on her return from exile abroad after the birth of an illegitimate daughter.

I am sure I need not warn you to observe the strictest sobriety and moderation in your dress. Let it be simple and noble, but pray do not let it be singular, and how glad I should be if you could tell me you had quite done with rouge. . . . There must be some period for taking up a different character of dress and when can you find a better than now at your return after so considerable an absence.¹⁰³

Anxious to survive scandal, her Spencer relatives urged the duchess that it behooved a disgraced woman of thirty-six to be less noticeable and “shewy.” Not that there is much evidence of the dawn of a new epoch of inconspicuousness.

The peaks and troughs of the poverty cycle in many families also counteracted middle-aged retreat. Toil and poverty accelerated physical aging for working women, but paradoxically middle age could be an era of sartorial recovery for mothers who had children in paid work. The lowliest family accounts that survive in England were created by the Lathams of Scarisbrick—a family of Lancashire tenant small-holders. Nany and Richard Latham had eight children (seven of them daughters) between their marriage in 1723 and the birth of the youngest in 1741. As a young mother, Nany Latham enjoyed few new garments, with family income drained by rent and labor, and the children’s shoes in particular. There were no new purchases of stays or gown lengths of cloth for Nany, so she must have worn out the wardrobe of her youth. However, a new era was marked by the purchase of camblet for a new gown in 1742, her first new dress in eighteen years, followed by new stays, two costly shag hats, and a silk handkerchief. With the teenagers contributing to the family economy (and buying gowns, stays, hats, and handkerchiefs for themselves), this was a high point in the poverty cycle. Nany’s forties and fifties saw her reemergence after the purdah of impoverished maternity. She indulged at last in clothes “for outside.” Mrs. Latham’s back may have bent, but her hat was fine, her petticoat glossy, and her horizons expanding. After young adulthood, middle age was the best time for show. But this Indian summer had to end. As the girls left, the Lathams had to pay for more labor on the farm, and as they ailed

¹⁰² [Charles Piggot] *The Female Jockey Club; or, a Sketch of the Manners of the Age by the author of the former Jockey Club*, 4th ed. (London, 1794), 36–37.

¹⁰³ Earl of Bessborough, ed., *Georgiana: Extracts from the Correspondence of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (London, 1955), 202: Lady Spencer to the Duchess, 19 October 1793. Thanks again to Hannah Greig for this reference.

and aged, they were capable of less work themselves. Nany had a final spending spree around the age of sixty when her last daughter left, buying a silk camblet gown, black and white printed gowns, a silk handkerchief, and a red cloak, but after 1758 expenditure on clothes fell steeply. Old age and infirmity was upon them.¹⁰⁴

A decorous middle-aged retirement was a luxury single working women could not afford. Their very livelihood was at stake. Anne Platt was a governess from Rotherham who was preoccupied with the precariousness of her position, which age, and especially the appearance of old age, only accentuated. “My hair changed at a very early period, and was then literally ‘orange mixt with Grey,’” she sighed in her forties. She worried her unmarried niece was set to follow in her footsteps.

I am quite provoked with you for being so weak as to lose a tooth, and for your comfort I can tell you, they will drop out one after another, at least mine did so for my part I am of the opinion that they are strung like beads, and when the thread is once broke, why then goodbye to ye, you ought to have kept your teeth in your head at least twenty years longer, this loss disguise one more, and makes a person look older than either grey hair or wrinkles.

Tooth decay was rife in the century of sugar, accelerating one of the most common manifestations of decline, and looking old exposed a woman to redundancy. Anne especially pitied the housekeeper Mrs. Sherwood in 1801:

She has not yet got a place, and I fear never will, as no one would engage a person to preside over a large family and attend to the kitchen who is 64 years of age and appears much older, poor woman.¹⁰⁵

Unemployed and homeless, Mrs. Sherwood would doubtless succumb eventually to poor relief. In truth, Poor Law authorities tended to sympathize with deserving old women, but basic rations and institutional clothing were not an appetizing prospect for the respectable and independent.¹⁰⁶ Keeping up the appearance of comparative youth could be vital to economic endurance, while looking old before one’s time was disastrous. “Ultimately, in the very visual world of early modern Europe, age was assigned, like status, on the basis of visual clues and physical signifiers,” Lynn Bothelo concludes. In short, whatever her calendar age, a woman was old when she looked old. Hence an old maid’s ribbons could be the very equipment of survival—the announcement that she would not yet awhile be obliterated.

Against this enduring backdrop, the eighteenth century presented new challenges. The flood tide of print after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 and the rise of the engraved caricature fed a riotous flowering of visual satire. Meanwhile, fashion change became more intense and faster moving. The inauguration of annual and even seasonal shifts in the designs of woven silks by Lyons manufacturers in the

¹⁰⁴ *The Account Book of Richard Latham, 1724–1767*, ed. Lorna Weatherill (Oxford, 1990). The Latham accounts and the poverty cycle of fashion are discussed at length in John Styles, “Custom or Consumption? Plebeian Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England,” in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (London, 2003), 103–15.

¹⁰⁵ Anne Platt to Elizabeth Platt, Windlestone, 8 August 1800–August 1801, Platt Microfilm, f. 203, 226, Rotherham Public Library.

¹⁰⁶ Ottaway, *Decline of Life*.

1670s is one key accelerator of the fashion cycle.¹⁰⁷ The print revolution ensured that information about modes was ever more accessible, making fashion more difficult to negotiate, especially for those on its margins. Furthermore, anxieties about luxury and the obsession with taste meant that fashion excess became a key index of national moral and social well-being. Many writers on taste, manners, and aesthetics expected women to be the key regulators of the excesses of a commercial, potentially luxurious, society.¹⁰⁸ Female decorum in fashion was therefore crucial. Deep-seated assumptions about age and its seasons had to be reworked in the face of new consumer realities.

The allurements of the market itself powerfully offset the most toxic representations of female aging. The new ladies magazines tended to carry both didactic admonitions against mutton dressed as lamb and respectful commentary on new fashions in high life. “The secret of dressing,” advised *The Mirror of the Graces* of 1811, “lies in . . . a certain adaptation to your figure, your rank, your circumstances.” A woman had to make an honest assessment of her remaining attributes and make a nuanced selection accordingly. Facing the remorseless facts of life was key. “No woman is at forty what she was at twenty, not at sixty what she was as forty. Each age has an appropriate style of figure and of pleasing; and it is the business of discernment and of taste to discover and maintain these advantages in due season.”¹⁰⁹

The promotion of age-appropriate fashion is unremarkable in an era devoted to both decorum and the discovery of new markets. Eighteenth-century designers, makers, and retailers delighted in identifying, provoking, and profiting from the needs of an array of different consumers.¹¹⁰ Fashion was not a monolith, nor were mature and aging women universally invisible. Bespoke garments, tailored to the requirements of the individual, were the norm for the middling and upper ranks.¹¹¹ The fabric, style, cut, and trim could all be adapted to suit, so the modification of a fashion prototype to meet the requirements of middle age was unremarkable. “I went this morning into Tavistock Steet & ordered a genteel Cap &c for a young lady about 40,” Matthew Boulton teased his beloved wife on a trip to London in 1779. “[I]t is not to be fine but genteel.”¹¹² The vocabulary of appreciation suggests a variegated universe of material effects, be they becoming and pretty, polite and genteel, handsome and fine, or high fashion and modish. Fashionable

¹⁰⁷ In truth, the acceleration of fashion is more asserted than analyzed. Neil Mckendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, 1982). More concrete are Carlo Poni, “Fashion as Flexible Production: The Strategies of the Lyon Silk Merchants in the Eighteenth Century,” in *World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization*, ed. Charles Sabel and J. Zeitlin (Cambridge, 1997), 37–74; John Styles, “Indian Cottons and European Fashion, 1400–1800,” in *Global Design History*, ed. Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello, and Sarah Teasley (London, 2011), 40.

¹⁰⁸ Robert W. Jones, *Gender and the Formation of Taste in Eighteenth-Century Britain: The Analysis of Beauty* (Cambridge, 1998).

¹⁰⁹ *Mirror of the Graces* (1811), 60.

¹¹⁰ On the invention of new categories of goods to inspire new needs and colonize new markets, see Amanda Vickery, “Fashioning Difference in Georgian England: Furniture for Him and for Her,” in *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800*, ed. Paula Findlen (London, 2012), 342–59.

¹¹¹ There were some readymade gowns and garments on the market, but because labor was far cheaper than the fabric itself, resort to the mantua maker was normal.

¹¹² Matthew Boulton, London, to Nanny Boulton, 13 May 1779, MS 3782/16/71, Birmingham Central Library.

producers were alert to niche markets. Matronly gentility and handsome finery were but two options for forty-somethings.

Today, scores of buyers filter catwalk trends for the more conservative department stores, and designers reengineer looks in cheaper fabrics or in more practical versions depending on the age and pocket of their customer base. In the eighteenth century, that reinterpretation of style was an informal process driven by the consumer and depending on fashion information, a judgment on decorum, the balance of aspiration and risk, the stocks and knowledge of suppliers of fabric and accessories, and the expertise of dressmakers, tailors, and milliners. Misogynist discussion of female appearances admitted only three adult life stages: blooming, past her prime, and old. Yet women's own correspondence conjures an infinitely subtler set of personal coordinates with costumes and accouterments to match.

This is not to cast retailers as feminist progressives fighting the forces of patriarchy, ageism, and misogyny one garnet dress at a time. Merchants were almost certainly uninterested in wider conceptual debates about the value of female subordination and invisibility. Moreover, the visual satires on "mutton dressed as lamb" issued from the market too—the roaring trade in print. However, most fashion and luxury retailers were fully cognizant of the importance to business survival of flattering feminine taste and consequence, taking for granted that women customarily managed the family purse (under notional male control) for textiles and trinkets, while sharing decision making for expensive domestic purchases even where men paid. "Old maids" with means carried full legal title to their monies, and comfortable widows, pleasing themselves at last, were customers worth snaring. Only a business bent on bankruptcy would humiliate its older customers and turn aside thirty years or more of trade. Moreover, Georgian manufacturers were set on exploiting myriad differences to create, protect, and expand markets, so they had a vested interest in celebrating fashion for the middle-aged and older woman, as well as for the debutante and young matron. Doubtless advertising, marketing, and shop patter reinforced the idea that different wardrobes suited different stages and stations of womanhood, from girlish ribbons to stately bonnets, but equally, shopgirls were not in the business of policing flashy matrons to the detriment of sales. Foolish the milliner who told an old woman to unhand the silver lace. The print shop on the high street purveyed gross misogynist caricature, but next door the mercer might be selling pink silk to sixty-somethings regardless. Cumulatively, the Georgian marketplace tended to endorse the public profiles of older women, suggesting a galaxy of imagined performances that overwhelmed the misogynist discourse arguing for their obliteration.